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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the need for group-based or team-based techniques to facilitate organizational learning. It identifies two process-oriented strategies: the role analysis technique (RAT) and the diagnostic window technique. These techniques can be used in meetings to model the intellectual tasks that need to occur in today's learning organizations, to encourage critical thinking in employees by challenging assumptions about interpersonal transactions and existing mental models, and to offer opportunities for experimentation and enlivening of group interaction. The concept of the "learning organization" is explained, as are implications for the training and education of organization employees. RAT is described as a technique for improving the effectiveness of a work group through a process that clarifies role expectations in a group setting. The diagnostic window technique is intended to help a group identify important issues and problems through the use of a matrix which identifies things that are not working, things that are working, things amenable to change, and things not amenable to change resulting in four quadrants which identify areas of potential positive change. Both techniques are seen as requiring employees to practice behaviors expected in the learning organization. (DB)

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Assessment Techniques to Enhance Organizational Learning

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Paul Lyons

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Assessment Techniques to Enhance Organizational Learning

Paul Lyons

Abstract

In today's fast-paced, complex organizations there is a need for the identity of and use of proven, group-based or team-based techniques to jump-start organizational learning. Techniques that help organization members to surface issues, identify assumptions, interpret conditions, propose ways and means of obtaining information, and the like are in demand.

In this brief essay I identify two process-oriented strategies, namely, the Role Analysis Technique (or, Transaction), and, the Diagnostic Window. These techniques may assist group leaders, trainers, or other HR professionals augment their teaching role in three important ways. First, the strategies help to model in meetings some of the intellectual tasks that need to occur in today's learning organizations. Second, the strategies encourage and reward critical thinking in employees because basic assumptions about interpersonal transactions and deeply-held mental models are challenged. Third, the strategies offer opportunities for experimentation and the enlivening of group interaction.

Introduction

Regardless of job assignment, training, background or skills, many, if not most, employees eventually are going to direct and lead units or groups in our diverse, evolving organizations. Managers, supervisors, and HR professionals can make use of some techniques and strategies that model the emerging learning organization. Thus, our employees have opportunities to learn in new ways and so do we.

At this time, I have substantial anecdotal evidence regarding changes in behavior and attitudes resulting from the use of the techniques. On both formal and informal meetings and training evaluations, employees report that the techniques were stimulating and useful. Further, they report that their personal involvement in helping to shape mutual expectations in learning and

improvements in group functioning were important in their own learning and development. I have used both techniques with success in a variety of organizations (military, health care, education, manufacturing).

Background

Today, our organizations are changing in terms of values, structures, processes, and expectations. Some of the changes are extraordinary; some of them are shared across many organizations. For example, it is not unusual for a firm to remove a particular critical organizational function and seek another organization to provide the function on a contractual basis. Further, we find many organizations moving to forms of 360 degree performance appraisal and the practice is entirely new to employees. We need to help our employees prepare for living in the new organization. Many of our organizations are undergoing transformations from rather static, function-based entities to something "different." As portrayed in management and HR literatures the new organization carries different labels these days such as new paradigm, post-modern, post/post-modern, virtual, flexible, and so on.

Successful organizations that invest greatly in the selection of their human resources and employee learning (for example, HP, Allied-Signal, Inc., State Farm Insurance, Motorola) expect that employees have substantial content knowledge in their work specialization, and, be well prepared in the process and behavioral dimensions of their experience. The process and behavioral dimensions such as effective communication skills and negotiation skills are attributes that play a vital role in individual and group learning. Individuals at all levels of an organization must combine the mastery of some technical expertise with the ability to interact effectively with customers and clients, work productively in teams, and critically reflect upon and then change their own organizational practices.

The Learning Organization

We are witness to the evolution of the learning organization. In very general terms, a learning organization is one in which the members are developing a systems view of the enterprise, its culture and environments, both internal and external. Discovery processes such as "double loop learning" that Chris Argyris describes, are used frequently by organization members as they work together to better understand the enterprise, its functions, tasks, opportunities, strengths, and needs. We find this learning in the corrective action teams (CAT) for problem-solving of the Bausch & Lomb Corp. and the training in group dynamics of Penril DataComm Networks; we find it in the self-directed process teams of the Jefferson City plant of Cheeseborough-Ponds. The behavior and practices the learning organization requires and expects suggest new directions for the training and education of organization employees.

Learning organization is the name given to the new, transactional environment of many businesses and private sector organizations. It is a creation in language of an ideal, an approach, a vision, a move toward a type of organization that we want to work in and which can succeed in a world of increasing change and interdependency. The learning organization is a metaphor for a way of being and it requires behavior that is much different from behavior expected in the more traditional organization. The learning organization requires basic shifts in how we think and interact and these changes go to bedrock assumptions and habits of our culture.

Training - Intervention - Instruction Methods

There are several employee and manager or supervisor practices that may be regarded as important or necessary for the emerging learning organization. Some examples are:

* search for novel solutions, opportunities,
* give and seek information,
* benefit from other's differences,
* honor the contributions of others,
* question basic assumptions, practices,

* value heterarchy over hierarchy,
* deliberately acquire feedback,
* seek, give evaluation,
* set goals, targets; and,
* evaluate your own performance.

Activities that encourage such behavior are often those that focus on ill-defined, complex problems. Often, experiential learning, and some collaboration or team-work in problem finding and problem solving are required.

In order to spring some of the ideas presented here to life, I offer two techniques. They are not new nor particularly complex but they are very robust methods that stimulate and encourage critical learning. The techniques may be used in a unit, team, department or group in an organization. Each of them encourages many of the behaviors characteristic of the learning organization. The techniques are the Role Analysis Transaction [(or, RAT), (see, Dyal and Thomas, 1968)] and the Diagnostic Window (see, Ruma, 1974). These are very powerful techniques for engaging employees in meaningful reflection and analysis. My experience in using them with employees and supervisors suggests that regardless of choice of method, the initial issue or problem identified for review is one that must address something of interest to most participants. The issue should be one in which participants have a direct stake such as job performance, cost cutting, customer satisfaction, product or service quality, and the like.

Fortunately, for trainers, group leaders and others, the learning and change technology from the field of organizational development (OD) offers many methods and processes which may be adapted for use in training and education in ordinary circumstances. Meetings or training as learning laboratories are where groups and teams can practice and learn together.

Role Analysis Transaction (RAT)

The RAT is a tool for improving the effectiveness of a work group. It helps to clarify role expectations, that is, the expectations members of the work group have for their own performance and for the performances of other group members. The RAT stands on the notion that

determination of role requirements, by consensus involving all concerned, will ultimately result in more effective and mutually satisfactory performance. The expectation is that participation and collaboration in the definitions and analyses of roles by group members will result in greater clarification of who is to do what and why.

Assumptions

Assume there are several roles in the work group and assume that there are written job descriptions and/or job specifications for each job or role, however, this is not necessary to carry out the RAT.

Process - Sequence

1. We establish a meeting for the work group for the purposes of exploring existing working relationships and for examining the nature of the work performed in the group or team. The intent is for all to learn and understand. Consistent with the research on performance of groups, sharing is necessary in effective groups and teams. If job descriptions are available they are distributed to all group members prior to the meeting.

2. At the initial meeting, one member of the group will describe in detail what he or she does and why. Not all group members may be willing to be first in this description activity. Volunteering is difficult for some people to do. It may be desirable to discuss this entire activity with some individual members prior to the initial meeting in order to identify one who is willing to volunteer to be first. One of the things I do to help ease people into (the) dialog early in the activity is to coach the volunteer in advance. I advise the volunteer to begin their descriptions with the tasks or duties they believe most RAT participants know the most about. Also, it helps if less complex tasks or activities are described first and then the volunteer proceed to more complex tasks.

In the meeting the volunteer describes the job/role in detail. The volunteer discusses the description with others, answers questions, examines relationships with the role and so on until the participants agree that they have clearly described the job. All conclusions are written down.

3. The volunteer (the role holder) next lists his or her expectations regarding the other members of the work group relative to the role holder's job and performance. These expectations are discussed, eventually agreed-upon, and then written down. I have already explained the steps and procedures, in detail, to all participants so everyone knows the order and sequence of activities in the RAT.

Conflicts often emerge in stages 3 and 4. It would be surprising if some conflict didn't surface. When conflicts occur, I encourage the participants to use descriptors and interpretations that will achieve consensus. If consensus is blocked, for whatever reasons, I surface my perceptions of the blocking and ask the participants to reflect on the perceptions. Often, this activity helps to clarify information and understanding. If consensus is still not possible, we settle for majority opinion and move on. Voting is seldom used, although I have had to resort to voting on some issues.

4. Then, all group members commence to list their expectations of the role holder. Again, discussion, interpretation, agreement, and recording of vital information takes place.

5. Finally, the role holder assembles all of the written information from the discussions and prepares what is called a role profile. This profile is written and distributed to all group members. At a second meeting, any confusion or questions regarding the role profile can be discussed. Also, at a second meeting the group may progress to a second person's role (a new volunteer) and repeat the process all over. It may not be necessary to repeat the entire process for every role in the group as the group members will learn much about the work and expectations of the team in some roles such that further exploration may not be productive. My experience indicates that full discovery of the first role may take from two to three hours. This includes time for recording. Subsequent role discovery and examination will take less time as the group learns to be more efficient.

My most recent experience with the RAT was with the professional staff of a large, residential retirement/health care facility in the mid-Atlantic region. The staff was experiencing some problems regarding responsibilities, scheduling, and the like. The supervisors and managers

involved in the RAT represented different functional areas. The people had worked fairly closely together in the past, so general familiarity with functions, tasks, and so on, was not a large issue.

We used the RAT to help create definitions, interpretations, and understandings regarding role, functions, task sequencing, and the like. There was some resistance toward its use early on by the staff. The primary complaint was that the process was too time consuming for the amount of information attained (projected payoff?). However, by the time we got into the descriptions of the second role holder in the sequence of activities, the members of the group were expressing, out loud that they "hadn't understood completely" the scope and complexity of the role holders responsibilities. The RAT technique clearly was helpful in the learning of these professionals.

The Diagnostic Window

This technique is relatively easy to employ. This technique helps a group to identify important issues and problems. It helps a group to place priority on a number of issues. Issues may spring from a broad variety of topics: concerns/questions with job requirements, feedback on performance, the way in which communication is managed, and so forth. As far as the amount of time needed for use of the technique, I recommend an initial session of no less than three hours. To achieve substantial progress on multiple or complex issues or problems, several sessions may be required. All group participants are given a page with this information:

	Things that are not working	Things that work
Amenable to change	POTENTIAL	OPERATIONAL
Not amenable to change	DISASTER	TEMPORARY

The quadrants need to be explained to the group:

1. Potential: entries here represent things that are not working and are amendable to change. These are the matters we can do something about -- positive change (example: quality or timliness of feedback on performance).

2. Operational: entries represent that which is running smoothly and may require some small adjustments (example: customer comments on service).

3. Disaster: real problem areas that show small likelihood of turnaround. This sets the stage for creative thinking (example: providing more one-to-one personal evaluation of performance).

4. Temporary: entries in this quadrant represent issues that are not particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial (example: policy on absences).

Process

1. Explain Diagnostic Window to the group, the purpose of the activity, and give examples of issues (tasks, roles, etc.). When I introduce the Diagnostic Window, I do not give the activity a title, rather, I simply inform the participants that we will use a technique that is hands-on, practical in nature, and one that may assist them in their learning, understanding, and problem-solving. I tell them that the use of the technique results in an active, generative process that is limited in its helpfulness only by their energy and commitment.
2. Complete the four segments of the Diagnostic Window (10 - 15 minutes). Anything regarding the topic is fair game.
3. Then, place four large sheets of newsprint on the walls and label them 1,2,3, and 4. Ask participants to post their responses on the sheets.
4. Next, the whole group discusses the entries on the sheets of newsprint for clarification, interpretation, dialog and explanation. The idea is to reach consensus on issues and the liklihood of change where change is needed. Hold discussion of the *POTENTIAL* quadrant until last because it may capture the greatest amount of individual and group energy.
5. Finally, help the group to outline and define some action plans to address the needed changes. Participants and the group leader should have specific responsibilities, time lines, deliverables, and outcomes for change. Commitments are thus clarified. The group leader may want to re-visit some of the action plans and adjustments with the group later on as a reality check. One of the ways to help the group members learn and to secure commitments to change is to ask the group to rank order needed changes in order of liklihood of payoff (or, success). This request extends the time required for the group meeting, however, it stimulates critical thinking about organization needs and priorities.

A few months ago, I used the Diagnostic Window with a group of supervisory maintenance and housekeeping staff at a large, urban university. There was considerable anxiety among the staff regarding the implementation of a new performance evaluation system that tied performance outcomes to pay. Complaints were heard about the need for the new system, the adequacy of it, fairness issues, and so on. Many people did not understand the new system.

We used the Diagnostic Window as a device to evoke perceptions and attributions regarding performance appraisal. A great number of suggestions resulted from the use of the tool. Senior managers, who were able to judge the validity of the responses, said that both the quantity and quality of the suggestions (and, implementation ideas) were surprisingly good. The senior managers now had several paths to follow to more positively integrate the new performance evaluation system into the organizational culture.

Conclusion

Both of these activities require employees to practice some of the behaviors expected in the learning organization. Namely, employees work on ill-defined, complex problems; they search for novel solutions; they give and seek information; they benefit from the differences and contributions of others; they question basic assumptions and practices; they observe the group leader (and each other) deliberately require feedback; and, goals and targets are set as continuous improvements are sought.

Use of the techniques are powerful learning tools for managers because the information discussed and created by participants provide windows for managers to glimpse what others perceive as problems, constraints, opportunities, and, understandings of organizational culture and aims.

The techniques are particularly helpful in assisting managers and employees-in-general to explore inter-relationships among fuctions and activities. In some organizations, change is so rapid that individual and unit functions, tasks and responsibilities change radically in a matter of months. The use of the techniques of Role Analysis Technique and Diagnostic Window can be most helpful in conditions of structural change, in particular, as they help to address personal and behavioral adjustments to and creation of change.

Suggested Readings

Learning Organization: Argyris, C. 1991. Teaching smart people how to learn. Harvard Business Review. May-June: 99-109.

Role Analysis Technique: Dayal, I., and Thomas, J.M. 1968. Operation KPE: Developing

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